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ABSTRACT

As Labov points out (1971), language is a social phenomenon, and therefore must be studied in its social context; sex based language differences, being part of language, must be studied in the same way. Specifically, sex based language differences can be studied by modifying the sociolinguists' notion of speech community and speech continuum, and by using their methods of gathering and evaluating data. A three-dimensional space whose axes are formality-informality, specificity as to sex, and specificity as to speech community is substituted for Labov's single continuum. Every utterance of every speaker is placed within this space according to how the social situation is perceived by the speaker. To test this model, the members of an all female bridge club were interviewed in two situations: fairly formal individual, and informal group. It was predicted that the latter would elicit more, and more highly marked "female language" than the former because it is more informal and more sex specific. The former, however, being not sex neutral, would also elicit some female language samples. The data support the model. What is particularly significant is the fact that no such differences had been systematically attested except in our work (cf. Thorne & Henley, 1975). (Author/CLK)

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When Do Ladies Talk Like Ladies?

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When Do Ladies Talk Like Ladies?*

It has been claimed (see Tyler, 1976) that the linguistic aspects of sex based language differences, as opposed to some of the social and psychological ones, are difficult to objectify. The curious fact about this matter is this: though our intuitions agree strongly with the claims on sex based language differences made by grammarians from Jespersen (1964) to Lakoff (1975), experiments cannot seem to find statistically valid evidence for these claims and intuitions in the laboratory (see, e.g., Thorne & Henley, 1975). At SECOL XV, both Tyler and I argued that this lack of objective data is due to a basic misconception about the nature of the phenomenon. Sex based language differences, we argued then, are sociolinguistic phenomena, and as such must be collected and analyzed using the methods and theory of sociolinguistics.

To be more exact, we argued that sex based language differences form a continuum that is separate from, but interacts with, the formal-informal continuum posited by sociolinguists to account for sociolinguistic variation. This means that settings like classrooms, offices, and laboratories, where investigators had been collecting data, are unlikely to show sex based language

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*We would like to thank two of our students: Dianne Linder for obtaining the cooperation of the sample population and conducting the individual interviews; and Donna Jefferson for her tireless work in analyzing the data.

differences because these settings are formal and sex neutral. In order to collect data exhibiting sex based language differences, researchers need to observe informants in sex specific settings. The reason, then, why investigators have not found the sex based language differences posited by grammarians is the same as that why investigators have not found social language variation in formal situations; these situations constrain the informants' linguistic output to be sex neutral and formal.

Experimental Design

Just as sociolinguists went "out into the real world" and collected language samples in situations where they controlled for the social setting; so, we argued, must researchers in sex based language differences go out and also control for social setting. In an effort to accomplish this, we devised the following experiment: we interviewed the members of an all female bridge club in two situations; one, a group interview while the women were playing cards at the home of one of their group; the other, individual interviews at each woman's home. Group interviews were recorded with individual lapel microphones and on separate tracks for each informant; individual interviews were recorded in normal fashion. All individual interviews were conducted by the same female investigator; no investigators were present during the group interviews, though they were present before and after these interviews in order to affix or remove microphones, adjust recording levels, etc.

The group interviews were, of course, the informal sex specific situation. The individual interviews were, therefore, structured so as to be formal and somewhat sex-neutral (though female) situations. To accomplish this, the investigator posed as a student of adult games and asked the women to explain bridge and its finer points to her.

The informants are upper middle-class housewives, between 35 and 40 years old. They all have at least B.A.'s and are married to university professors.

We predicted that we would find more instances of so-called feminine language in the group interviews than in the individual ones. For preliminary purposes we accepted the classic definitions of feminine language, namely,

1. Choice of Lexical Items

   Grammarians from Jespersen to Lakoff have claimed that women use adjectives like lovely, pretty, cute, etc. and adverbs like pretty, awfully, etc. (see, e.g., Lakoff, 1975:8-15).

2. Choice of Exclamations

   The same grammarians have also claimed that women use exclamations like dear me, oh, dear, etc. (see, e.g., Lakoff, ibid.).

3. Choice of Syntactic Constructions

   Jespersen (1964, Ch. XIII) claims that women use so construction without the attendant that; as in

   I'm so tired that I can hardly move

   where women are said to leave out the that . . .

4. Intonation Contours

Some grammarians (e.g., Brend, 1975) also claim that women use intonation contours that have more "ups and downs" (i.e., have more, and more extreme, changes in pitch and stress) than do so-called masculine contours.

Findings and their Significance

Our predictions proved to be correct except for one explainable observation. That is, with respect to the first three points I just mentioned, the predictions were quite correct; with respect to the last point, they proved largely correct. Thus, we found, in general, that the women used perhaps a couple of feminine lexical items each, no feminine exclamation, and only two or three so phrases in the individual interviews, but roughly ten times as many each in each category in the group interview!

Two important points need to be made as regards the three specific claims about women's language made above: first, despite grammarians' claims, no one had systematically attested these forms before (see, e.g., Thorne & Henley, 1975). Second, in this experiment the forms were not only systematically attested, but were attested where we predicted them: in sex specific, informal situations. Allow me to cite you a few choice examples.

1. Lexical Choices

The air has a lovely odor this morning.

We're quite thrilled with it.

I guess we'd better get that little poopsy-doopsy there. (said of a trick)

Everybody's running except the kitchen sink. (about the local elections)

She had fiddley skiddle. (i.e., "nothing"--in counting her tricks)

Giddley, yeah.

He was awful sweet to us.

You're awful nice.

Nicki, dear, what did you make?

Hallelujah, my partner's counting.

Yummies. (said in response to partner's announcement of a high score)

2. Exclamations

He's . . . so dang dumb!

My heavens, they beat us!

Thank you, sweetheart!

Bless you, darling!

Oh, my heavens!

Oh, beautiful, Charley, . . . that's just beautiful!

That's a good girl!

Well, goodness . . . !

Isn't that terrible?!

Whooops!

Gee, you're really lucky today, aren't you?

3. So Constructions

I'm so tired of that

He's . . . so dang dumb

I just was so nervous

I'm so tired of that already

She gets so mad at me

I was so low in clubs

That sounds so strange

Your purse is so pretty, Jill

I was so thrilled she did

With respect to feminine I.C.'s, the situation is more complex. It would, of course, be quite unrealistic to expect to find only "flat" I.C.'s in the formal interviews, or only extreme ones in the group. Our prediction, then, was the following: all I.C.'s are flatter in the formal situation than in the group. Further, the ratio of extreme I.C.'s to flat ones is higher in the group than in the individual interviews. To test the first prediction, we selected and re-recorded 32 passages for each informant, such that we had the 8 flattest and the 8 most extreme for both formal and informal situations.

We were going to analyze these passages on a pitch extractor; however, this proved to be impossible because of "noise" on the tape. The noise was, of course, other people talking. That is, at high points in the conversation, when voices were raised, informants recorded not only on their own tracks but also on those of other informants. And it is, as you may have guessed, at these high points that most of the extreme I.C.'s occurred. Since a pitch extractor cannot distinguish one informant's voice

from another, machine analysis was not possible. We therefore had the tapes rated by impartial judges whom we trained briefly. Training consisted of a short explanation of intonation contours, and an almost as short familiarization with a ten-point I.C. rating scale, where "ten" is most extreme, and "one" is flattest. Raters were asked to listen to and rate twenty sample sentences and their ratings were discussed. (Needless to say, none of the practice sentences were on the actual tapes to be rated. We also randomized the recorded samples for judging.)

Figure 1

Informant		1	2	3
GROUP	Extreme	6.125	6.375	5.5
	Flat	4.0	4.25	3.5
INDIVIDUAL	Extreme	4.625	5.125	6.125
	Flat	2.375	3.75	3.25

Examples of Means for Informants' I.C.'s. Note the inversion of values for Extreme Group and Extreme Individual I.C.'s for Informant No. 3.

As Figure 1 indicates, the judges rated as we predicted--except for one informant, whose rating I will return to shortly. That is, with this exception, highest scores were given to the extreme group I.C.'s, next highest to the extreme individual I.C.'s, next to the flat group I.C.'s and lowest to the flat individual I.C.'s.

Because of the small number of informants in this pilot study, inferential statistics are inappropriate.

I promised to take up the matter of the exceptional informant (No. 3). Closer examination of the data reveals that she is a person who does not talk much in a group, and particularly does not talk over others. When she is interrupted, she simply stops speaking. Therefore, she has few extreme I.C.'s in the group interview. This fact was correctly interpreted by the judges, who rated her individual extreme I.C.'s higher overall than her extreme group I.C.'s.

The significance of the I.C.'s and their rating is similar to that of the other items: they had not been attested before, and we not only did attest them, but we found them were we predicted them. However, finding the more extreme I.C.'s in the group interview leads us to the more general question of whether this situation leads all speakers to exhibit such changes in I.C.'s. The answer to this must wait until after we have collected and analyzed data from other informants, including males. The answer will be interesting, regardless of whether it is "yes" or "no." If the answer is "no," we will have found another sex based language difference. If, on the other hand, the answer is "yes, and <u>all</u> speakers exhibit such changes in I.C.'s," then we will have found something no one has ever posited before.

Conclusion

Obviously, this study exhibits some problems, most of them solveable. Sample size and unequal interview lengths are

simple to deal with, given enough time and money. Noise of other speakers in group interviews is a problem we will probably have to live with, though we are going to experiment with other types of microphones; again, money permitting. Similarly, interviewing other groups, including all male groups, is a question of time and money.

On the other hand, we can safely say that our data confirm our hypothesis; not just the particular hypothesis for this paper, but the general one about the nature of sex based language differences. This is encouraging, particularly since this study is only one in a series of such studies, and the findings in general support our model (i.e., Russo, 1977, and Tyler, 1977). In addition to the two papers preceding this one, you may recall the slang vs. formality self-perception study I reported on at SECOL XV (i.e., Menzel, 1976). We are working on several follow-up studies to that one, and they all indicate that the race-by-sex-by-formality paradigm is the correct one. This has lead us to modify our model somewhat. At SECOL XV we presented essentially a two-dimensional model with two continua of sex and formality. To this we now add a third dimension: that of speech community. We have thus a three-dimensional space, in which the speaker's linguistic response can be plotted. The axes of this space--the three continua--are: formality of situation, sex specificity of situation, and speech community specificity. Since we have discussed the first two concepts at length, there is no need to go into them again. The third

concept (continuum) represents our attempt at capturing the fact that social and geographic aspects of the speaker's background will also determine in part the speaker's linguistic output. In other words, this axis represents the fact that, irrespective of sex and formality, a Bostonian sounds different from an Atlantan, just as a Viennese sounds different from a Berliner, and a Florentine sounds different from a Roman. The speech community axis is not only geographic, however, but also social. That is, it includes all pertinent factors about the speaker's speech community. The speaker's integrity to his native speech community, then, is plotted on this, third, axis.

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